

This article was in the newspaper in Paducah KY. It's interesting coverage of Ed Chewning's time at Da Nang. Although the article covers an incident before Ed became a Life Supporter and the reporter falsely indicated Ed had been drafted in the USAF, I still found it to be interesting and thought it might be something we could use to remind us all of where we came from and what we have been through! Cheers Tommy

Vietnam vet worked behind scenes in war

Editor's Note: This article is the fifth in a 10-week series honoring Vietnam veterans prior to the Paducah arrival of The Wall That Heals on Oct. 25.

By DAVID B. SNOW

Military members working in behind-the-scenes service and supply positions may seem less important than infantry soldiers, but if those duties aren't performed well, units may not get the vital support they need.

Take, for example, Ed Chewning of Trigg County. A member of Murray State University's ROTC classes, he was drafted into the Air Force in 1969 and sent to Da Nang Air Base in February 1971, one of the world's busiest airports during the Vietnam War.

Chewning and his crew worked from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., loading and unloading airplanes with whatever needed to be transported. Planes brought in all kinds of cargo to be unloaded, including ammunition, food supplies and weapons, while others would come in to be loaded with those items.

The air base had two parallel runways. Several aircraft were parked on the field at any given time, including F-4 fighter jets, C-130 transport aircraft, and civilian Boeing 707s.

In one corner of the field was an ammunition dump, a constant focus of worry by crew members because that would be a prime target for enemy fire. Crewmen avoided going near the dump for fear it would be hit by enemy fire when they got close.

At the other corner on the same side of the field was the morgue, where soldiers' bodies were stored after being brought to the base. Chewning said the morgue could be smelled from a long distance away.

One of his toughest moments at Da Nang came one night when he and his crew were called on to unload a plane. Sgt. Arthur Alford was leading Chewning's crew. "Our crew is up, and I see the meat wagon - the ambulance - a couple of them start pulling up," he said. "I said, 'Sgt. Alford, what kind of offload palettes have we got?' He said, 'Ed, a rocket hit a bunker up northwest of us.'

"I said, 'Oh. Are there dead on here?' and he said, 'Yeah.'"

The plane came to a stop at its designated point, and Chewning could see the body bags on palettes inside the plane. He and his crew members unloaded the bodies. The last palette was unusually light.

Chewning said, "We looked up at the loadmaster, and he said, 'Guys, there ain't much in there. I'll show you.' And before I could say, 'That's OK,' there was a boot, and there was an arm. I remember it had a wedding ring. It had a watch, and there was part of his body. (The loadmaster) said, 'He must have been right where that rocket hit.'"

Afterward, Chewning went to sit on a railroad tie near the edge of the airfield, taking in the experience. Alford approached him and said, "Ed, what are you thinking about?"

"I said, 'Just wondering what that guy was thinking about,'" Chewning said, fighting back tears. "'His wife? Did he have kids?' He said, 'Ed, you'll drive yourself crazy trying to think about that. This is cargo. I hate to say it, but it's cargo. That's what we do: We get cargo off, we put cargo on.'"

Chewning was made the crew chief soon after that and put in charge of many of the people he worked with before.

Those who think Chewning was fortunate not to serve in a combat area may want to think again. One of the more notable days for him was June 5, 1971, when the air base was attacked by North Vietnamese forces, who sent five rockets through the camp in a rare daylight attack.

When the alert siren went off, the crew thought someone had accidentally set it off, since attacks usually came at night. They found out differently when they had to dive for cover as the rockets flew through the base.

At least two Vietnamese civilians were killed, and five Vietnamese civilians and five Americans were injured in the attack.

His squadron earned a Four-Star Award from Pacific Air Force headquarters for going six months without a delay getting aircraft in or out of the air base.

Chewning left Vietnam in 1972 and retired from the Air Force in 1995 as a senior master sergeant.

"I was associated with some great people," he said. "The heroes were the guys out in the field - God bless 'em - and the guys brought back in body bags and tin boxes. And the women. Everybody seems to always forget the women. I think there are 12 of them on the wall. Those were the real heroes."